Secondary sector interim report

January and February 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.

Secondary sector interim report

January and February 2021

Contents

This report summarises the findings from engagement and pastoral phone calls made to secondary schools during January and February 2021. This report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers, senior leaders and teachers.

Pupil wellbeing

Many schools are holding regular online form tutor sessions in order to check on pupil wellbeing. In these sessions, pupils are usually asked to turn on their cameras in order for their form teachers to see them. Schools are also holding regular online assemblies. Schools and parents are concerned about the amount of time pupils and staff are spending on screen and increasingly, schools are implementing no screen time sessions or days.

Cameo

Crickhowell High School

In order to support pupil and staff wellbeing, Crickhowell High School held a wellbeing day. This did not involve any screen time and was an opportunity for pupils and staff to complete extra-curricular activities, go for walks and so on. They intend to hold a weekly wellbeing afternoon where pupils and staff do not log on. They hope that this will support examination year group pupils in particular, as they are very anxious at the moment.

Overall, schools are finding that pupils are more anxious and unsettled during this lockdown. Older pupils are anxious about the arrangements for examinations and schools feel that the adverse weather, dark evenings and limited opportunities to go outside have had a negative impact on pupils' wellbeing. In addition, more parents are working during this lockdown, meaning that there is less support at home for some pupils. Most schools have seen an increase in referrals to external bodies such as CAMHS and child protection services, and in incidents of domestic abuse reported to them through Operation Encompass. Due to the increase in demand, schools are experiencing difficulties in getting support from external agencies for all pupils in need. In particular, Welsh-medium schools are experiencing challenges in accessing support for pupils through the medium of Welsh. School staff anticipate that there will be further increased demand for support from external agencies when all pupils return to school.

Cameo

Ysgol Gyfun Y Strade

Ysgol Gyfun Y Strade has added a 'Botwm Becso' (Concern Button) to its website. Pupils can use this button at any time of day or night to report any concerns or worries they may have. The information is confidential and goes straight to the assistant headteacher responsible for wellbeing who then contacts the pupil and decides how best to support them.

Schools are continuing to contact vulnerable pupils by phone. This is often done by teaching assistants. Many schools are also attaching teaching assistants to virtual classrooms in order to support vulnerable pupils with their work. Many schools have adapted the curriculum for vulnerable pupils who are struggling to engage or those with additional learning needs. In these cases, they often have a slimmed down curriculum and a specific focus on developing skills.

Cameo

Cathays High School

Cathays High School carries out regular wellbeing surveys. It allocates a wellbeing score to each pupil and monitor this carefully. It has found that it has a higher number of pupils in the vulnerable category than prior to the pandemic. For example, high ability girls in key stage 4 who are anxious about their GCSEs and the pandemic are now included. After identifying vulnerable pupils based on wellbeing scores, the school then puts actions in place to mitigate the wellbeing issues, such as using pastoral leaders and non-teaching staff to make contact with children and families to discuss anxieties.

In addition to vulnerable pupils and children of key workers, schools are increasingly inviting pupils who are not engaging well with school work, or who are struggling to engage, in to school, where they are provided with support.

Cameo

Crickhowell High School

As well as running a hub for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils, Crickhowell High School is also running a hub for pupils who have additional learning needs and have difficulties organising themselves to engage with their work from home. This hub is staffed by teaching assistants and support staff.

Childcare provision

Schools continue to provide childcare provision for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. Demand for this provision is fairly low and similar to that during the previous lockdown, though numbers are higher as schools are inviting more pupils to attend this provision. In many cases, teaching assistants and leadership teams support this provision.

Staff wellbeing

Schools report that teachers are positive in their attitude, though exhausted. They find planning for online learning very time consuming and are particularly concerned about the arrangements for examinations. In general, staff are more worried about the risks of contracting the virus than during the previous lockdown.

Distance learning

Schools are providing far more live lessons than during the previous lockdown. Headteachers welcome the changes to the guidelines regarding live lessons. Prior to the change, headteachers' interpretation of these guidelines varied, with some adapting their processes and providing live lessons (e.g. when year groups were self-isolating) and others feeling that the guidelines were preventing them from providing live lessons.

The approach to providing live lessons varies across schools. Many schools provide a combination of live lessons, pre-recorded lessons, semi-synchronous lessons, asynchronous learning materials and off-screen time or activities. This is in order to vary the diet for pupils, accommodate the demands on teachers who have caring responsibilities and reflect the fact that pupil access to digital devices remains an issue, particularly in homes where one device is shared between several siblings.

Increasingly, schools are expecting teachers to provide lessons where there is a 'teacher presence', either through live lessons or pre-recorded lessons featuring videos of the teacher. Schools are also encouraging teachers to introduce more interactive elements to lessons in order to increase pupil participation and build on teacher-pupil relationships. In schools where live lessons have been provided for some time, teachers have found that providing short live inputs, particularly at the beginning and end of lessons, interspersed with time for pupils to work independently or collaboratively works well and increases pupil engagement. In some schools there is a minimum expectation as to the number of live lessons (e.g. at least one per class per fortnight) whereas, in a few schools, teachers are expected to provide live lessons throughout the school day. Overall, key stage 4 and post-16 pupils tend to have more live lessons that pupils in key stage 3.

In some cases, teachers join two classes together, with one teacher 'delivering' the lesson and the other monitoring the chat and responding to pupils' questions. Teachers are also 'dropping in' or watching recordings of each other's lessons, and sharing responsibilities for planning online lessons. Schools report that this collaborative approach has proved to be a valuable opportunity for teachers to observe each other teach and to learn from each other.

Cameo

Cathays High School

Cathays High School has divided the online school day into three sessions of one and a half hours. Each day, two of these sessions are for lessons and one session is an independent study session for the completion of work and for pupils to use the various apps to which they have access, such as literacy and numeracy apps. There are also two online assemblies each week, during which pupils are set tasks to complete in their independent study sessions.

During the 'lesson' sessions, pupils complete subject specific work. Many teachers are finding it easier to deliver these as live sessions than providing asynchronous materials. During live sessions, teachers are not expected to be

speaking for the whole time. Pupils are given tasks to complete and the teacher monitors the completion of work online. The teacher is able to see each pupil's work and add comments, thereby providing immediate feedback. Pupils are expected to complete most of the work set during the hour and a half session (though they sometimes use the independent study session to complete work). Pupils have reported that they prefer this as they feel less overwhelmed by the volume of work and get live feedback. Leaders feel it is also more manageable for teachers.

The school reports that this system has made it easier for them to monitor true engagement with learning, because if pupils are logging into lessons they are also expected to complete work at the same time. Engagement with learning has improved as a result of this system. The school contacts those pupils who are not engaging and they are brought into school to complete work in the school building, with appropriate support.

Teachers are becoming increasingly confident in using technology to support learning, and encourage pupil interaction in particular. For example, teachers are making more use of the chat facility and virtual breakout rooms. Schools report that providing work and support that is suitably differentiated to meet the needs of learners of different abilities is particularly challenging when teaching remotely.

Cameo

Cardiff High School

Leaders and teachers at Cardiff High School have identified aspects that they encourage teachers to incorporate into their distance learning provision and others that they should avoid or limit. They have found that staff are often over planning sessions, and are now trying to encourage teachers to strip back the content of the lessons to ensure that effective learning is taking place. They encourage teachers to use 'low stakes' testing (quizzes, etc), so that they are checking pupils' engagement regularly. They are concerned that too many learning activities are taking place digitally and leaders are now encouraging teachers to set non-digital tasks like writing in a physical journal or reading a 'real' book. Teachers have regular conversations about pedagogy and are beginning to take a 'less is more' approach: 'chunking' work, consolidating learning, and ensuring that content is not covered at too fast a pace.

Through meetings and professional learning activities, staff have identified that teachers' communication skills are of vital importance, particularly their proficiency in initiating and developing discussion. Teachers have discussed approaches to questioning that work well in a synchronous session, and of the best uses of the 'chat facility' to encourage thoughtful responses from pupils. They have found that often, teachers overuse applications. Although these can create interest, they can also interfere with learning, especially when there is a necessity to open different file types on a phone or tablet. Senior leaders and teachers have identified that the effective use of simple facilities, such as the creative use of the 'hands up' facility, are more effective. Teachers have also discovered that pupils need to be guided more systematically through their learning than may be the case in the classroom where a teacher can easily support individuals or pupils may pick up

cues from their peers. Teachers are now working on making expectations clearer and signposting pupils throughout the learning. They are also looking at developing approaches to peer study groups.

Pupils work to a fixed timetable that mirrors the normal timetable. This includes a mixture of live lessons, webinars (where teachers introduce a session, pupils spend most of the time working individually, and pupils come back at the end of the session to discuss their work) and self-study periods. There is a maximum of three live or webinar sessions per day (so as not to overload in terms of screen time), and a balance of live and webinar sessions across the two-week timetable. All subjects are represented on the timetable. No live lessons are longer than 40 minutes. The strict timetable enables families to plan their time and access to devices. The school insists that teachers follow the timetable for this reason. A few pupils have requested that webinar materials are uploaded prior to the session, and that school has allowed this where it is feasible. The self-study periods allow time for staff to plan.

Schools are continuing to work to find the best ways of assessing pupils' work under the current circumstances. Schools have found that providing immediate verbal or written feedback while pupils are online has benefitted their learning. For example, staff use apps where they are able to see all pupils' work and add comments as they work, or use virtual mini whiteboards to gain an overview of all pupils' understanding. Schools are also using apps that enable staff to record a short audio file of verbal feedback related to each pupil's work. They can then see when pupils have listened to the feedback. Most schools are making use of quizzes and simple tests to monitor learning. In general, schools' work around assessment seems to be less advanced than that around distance learning provision and, in general, they are finding it challenging to accurately assess pupil progress under the current circumstances.

Pupils' skills

Prior to the lockdown, many schools had been offering interventions to pupils who needed additional support. Schools continue to offer these remotely, using teaching assistants or additional staff employed through the RRRS grant. Many schools are concerned about pupils' literacy skills in particular.

Sets and bands

In order to create bubbles that are as small as possible, many schools have changed their setting or banding arrangements in key stage 3. In many cases, pupils are taught in mixed ability classes, often in their form classes, for all their lessons. Where work is not suitably differentiated, this can prove frustrating for higher ability learners and challenging for those who need additional support. In a few cases, schools have used quarter or half year groups in order to keep bubbles small but to also allow for some element of setting. In other cases, pupils are taught in ability groups for all their lessons.

Monitoring of distance learning provision and pupil engagement

Schools have more structures in place to monitor the quality of online provision than during the previous lockdown. In many cases, this involves senior leaders and heads of departments or faculties becoming members of online classes and sampling the provision. If schools access Google Classroom via Hwb, they have fewer administrative rights than they would have otherwise. This can make monitoring more challenging and is a cause of frustration. Some leaders have chosen to virtually 'follow' a few pupils to better understand their experience of remote learning. In a few cases, leaders are observing live lessons. However, the nature, frequency and rigour of monitoring activities varies widely, and in some cases systems are ad hoc, rather than formalised. To varying degrees, schools also use pupil, staff and parent feedback from surveys to monitor provision. In some cases, this is the main mechanism for monitoring the quality of provision. Many schools are focusing on improving the quality of provision through professional learning and through modelling and sharing good practice.

> **Cameo**
>
> **Cardiff High School**
>
> In Cardiff High School, teachers volunteer to share the recordings of their live lessons in professional learning sessions that are open to all staff. These lessons are analysed to 'unpick' the learning and to identify effective practice.

> **Cameo**
>
> **Cathays High School**
>
> Cathays High School has involved all teachers in the monitoring of provision. Within subject area teams, teachers look at the books and online learning of sample group of pupils in different year groups. This enables them to compare the quality of provision. Their findings are moderated by the senior leadership team.
>
> Leaders have also introduced one to one reviews of online learning. These involve looking at recorded lessons within subject teams. No judgements are allocated to the lesson and the focus is on having a coaching conversation.

During the previous lockdown, schools' definition of pupil engagement varied widely. Many schools tended to use pupil log-ons to monitor engagement, with a minority using a range of criteria. Many schools have now developed more nuanced methods of gauging pupil engagement and are using a range of criteria, including the submission and quality of work. In general, schools' monitoring of pupil attendance and engagement is much tighter than during the previous lockdown. However, variation remains. Some schools register pupils in every lesson and pupils are contacted immediately if they fail to attend, others monitor and contact on a daily basis and some monitor weekly or fortnightly. A few schools report that some Year 9 pupils have stopped engaging with particular non-core subjects if they intend not to study them at GCSE. Schools also report that lower ability and disadvantaged pupils are the least engaged with distance learning.

Within-school and within-department variation remains an issue with distance learning. Teachers' competence and confidence in using technology can impact on the quality of lessons and some of the features of effective face-to-face teaching, such as questioning and pace can be difficult to replicate online.

Professional learning

Most leaders feel that the rapid development of staff's skills in using digital platforms and providing distance learning has been a positive outcome of the pandemic. Schools continue to focus the majority of their professional learning provision on these aspects. Schools also feel that the move to online meetings, including professional learning meetings and courses will be of benefit in the future and will enable more practitioners to access a wider range of professional learning experiences.

> **Cameo**
>
> **Ysgol Glan y Môr School and Bryngwyn School Federation**
>
> 'Shining the light' is Ysgol Glan y Môr School and Bryngwyn School Federation's approach to inspire and motivate staff to feel comfortable in this new way of working. Each week, teachers from different departments share one or two things they have used in the last fortnight and provide a sentence on how they used it, what went well and what barriers they encountered. Departments then nominate another department to share their good practice the following week. As more departments share the different things they have trialled, the project is evolving and encouraging further professional dialogue across the federation as a whole.

Qualifications and examinations

Many schools have placed their main focus on supporting examination year groups. Teachers feel pressure to complete as much of the examination courses as possible and to gather evidence about pupil progress in order to inform centre assessed grades. This focus was also reflected when pupils were in school, with examination year groups given priority with regard to subjects involving practical elements such as science experiments and using specialist rooms in design and technology.

Overall, schools feel that centre determined grades are the fairest option but are nervous regarding the appeals process and are worried that having no examinations will lead to a lack of motivation from examination classes. They are also anxious regarding the workload involved and about the uncertainty around assessment arrangements and vocational qualifications. There are particular concerns regarding departments involving only one member of staff. In one school, subject area teams have put together a plan of the evidence they already have, what is missing and how they might tackle any areas that are light. A few schools are working with other schools to add a peer review layer to their process in order to moderate centre determined grades.

Whereas last year's examination year group had completed most of their courses by the time the lockdown took hold, this year's examination year groups have only experienced around six months of 'normal' schooling. Experiences from September 2020 vary widely across schools, with Year 11 pupils in some schools having no disruption to their schooling and others missing 10 weeks of school, or more.

Communication with and support for parents

Many leaders feel that the pandemic has brought about an improvement in their school's relationship with parents and the way in which they communicate with them. The situation has meant that schools have needed to contact parents far more frequently than previously. Many schools have also made use of parental questionnaires to gauge their views on online provision and pupil wellbeing in particular.

Cameo

Ysgol Dyffryn Aman

Ysgol Dyffryn Aman has an online parental involvement programme. The programme focuses on working with parents to identify strengths and gaps in provision and to plan improvement priorities that will support parents. For example, workshops have been held on topics such as the use of Hwb and Google Classroom, pastoral support and wellbeing, support for pupils with additional learning needs and attitudes to learning.

Cameo

Ysgol Glan y Môr School

A parent support officer has been appointed in Ysgol Glan y Môr School. The officer deals with issues such as dropping off devices, dealing with ICT barriers, addressing any problems and helping with parental enquiries. The school has also set up a parent support website to help parents learn more about blended learning and the way in which Google Classroom works.

Cameo

Ferndale Community School

Ferndale Community School is in an area particularly hard hit by cases of COVID-19 that has been supported by the local authority to appoint a Family Engagement Officer. The officer has been deployed to work with families to break down anxieties, undertake home visits and manage phased returns to school. In addition, the officer has responsibility for overseeing the remote learning of those pupils who had been identified as being digitally excluded (in the summer) and monitoring their access to hardware and engagement with learning.

Many schools offer online parents' evening. One school found that attendance was higher than at a 'normal' parents' evening and leaders are considering keeping this arrangement for the future. Similarly, schools have moved much of their options process online, with departments providing video presentations about their subjects.

Digital devices and connectivity

Schools continue to report challenges with providing pupils and staff with computers. In particular, a minority of pupils do not have access to their own computer and have to share with their siblings. This makes it difficult for these pupils to access live lessons. Prior to the pandemic, teachers in many schools did not have a school laptop as they had desktop computers in their classrooms. Schools have had to invest funds in providing equipment to teachers, though some schools do not have the funds to do so.

Schools have had difficulties procuring equipment and when they have ordered it, many have had to wait or are still waiting for equipment to arrive. In one case, a school ordered laptops in June 2020 but is yet to receive these. In some cases, schools are reliant on charities to provide pupils with laptops. In addition, due to availability issues, schools have had to buy a variety of different devices such as ipads, Chromebooks and desktop computers. This can be challenging for schools as they use different software or are not equally flexible in their use.

Access to the internet remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas. In addition, though many pupils have been given dongles, others still struggle and schools have been providing SIM cards where they can, though this is not an ideal solution. In some cases, families lose access to the internet because of non-payment of bills and in others they live in temporary accommodation where gaining access to wifi is difficult. Some schools report problems with their broadband. For example, some schools had to limit the number of live lessons they were able to provide when teachers were streaming from the school building because of the capacity of the broadband. Similarly, some schools report that their systems crashed frequently because it could not cope with the number of files being uploaded.

Timing of the school day

A minority of schools adapted the timing of the school day when they returned to school in September. In some cases, this means that the school day ends between 1.40 and 2.15 p.m. Timings have been adjusted for a range of reasons, including having shorter, split lunchtimes as pupils are using the canteen in year groups or in order for bus companies to transport primary and secondary pupils separately to reduce virus transmission.

During the current online learning period, the timing and organisation of the school day varies from school to school. Some schools follow the usual school timetable, while others have shortened or lengthened lessons, introduced longer breaks or breaks between every lesson or ended the school day early to reduce the amount of time pupils spend on screen.

TTP

Headteachers continue to express frustration at the variation in advice regarding self-isolation across local authorities. In some local authorities, headteachers are told that they must ask whole year groups to self-isolate if there is a positive case or are told that they must be able to guarantee that pupils have not been in contact with a pupil who has tested positive in order to ask fewer pupils to self-isolate. In other local authorities, headteachers are told that they can use their own contact tracing systems to identify the pupils that need to self-isolate.

Newly qualified teachers and initial teacher training students

Provision for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) varies across schools. In some cases, NQTs have received provision that is broadly similar to that they would normally experience, albeit online. This includes meetings in school and support sessions from school and external mentors, as well as after school professional learning sessions. In some cases, they have also been observed teaching. However, in other examples, NQTs have received very little support from their school or higher education institution. Many schools are worried about their NQTs as they had so little teaching experience last year.

There is similar disparity in the provision for initial teacher education (ITE) students. For example, students from one university started teaching earlier than those from another, meaning that they gained more experience and practice. Similarly, in some schools they help to deliver live lessons alongside teachers whereas in others they have no experience of live teaching. In some cases, ITE students have been interviewed for teaching posts having never taught a lesson in a classroom.

Cameo

Cardiff High School

In order to support initial teacher education students, Cardiff High School runs sessions where students partake in a group analysis of a mentor's recorded lesson, and offer opportunities for students to plan and record whole lessons for their mentors to watch (rather than for pupils).